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ABSTRACT

Written by and about the homeless, the Chicago newspaper "StreetWise" has potential for use in creative writing classes. An urban community college instructor uses the newspaper to provide material from which her students, many of whom are at or below the poverty level, can derive ideas for writing and to raise her students' level of awareness about the homeless. Precisely because they are so economically close to the "StreetWise" vendors, the students sometimes find it difficult to use the stuff of their own lives in writing stories. Using readings from "StreetWise" allows then to discuss these issues while maintaining an emotionally protected distance. As a result of using the "StreetWise" material, some students have continued to read the paper, buying copies from a local vendor. While fulfilling a need for specific information, this material also makes poverty less anonymous and less shame-producing. (Seven writing assignments and material from "StreetWise" to accompany each assignment are attached.) (RS)

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StreetWise Writers: Use of StreetWise in Creative Writing Classes

Paper Presented at the Midwest Regional Conference
on Teaching English in the Two-Year College
Madison, Wisconsin, October 7-9, 1993

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M. Vertreace

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

The newspaper, StreetWise, made its debut in Chicago some time ago. Based on the idea that the homeless welcome an opportunity to help themselves, the paper fosters economic independence and stability, as well as encourages a life style free of substance abuse. Vendors purchase papers from the distributor for twenty-five cents, then sell them for a dollar, pocketing the difference. The editorial board arranges for counseling for vendors with special needs. Vendors are also taught how to save money, how to buy clothes so that they can go on job interviews, in short--how to better themselves and their families. Vendors can be seen anywhere in the city, from the downtown Loop to outlying neighborhoods.

Students see these vendors in all kinds of weather. The vendors exhibit the kind of tenacity which the students themselves would do well to emulate. Perhaps because of the discipline which the vendors exhibit, perhaps because many of the students themselves are one or two paychecks away from being homeless themselves, the students are fascinated by these people. The following list of rules is the code by which vendors operate:

StreetWise vendors cannot:

1. Sell the newspaper while under the influence of drugs or alcohol.
2. Solicit donations or funds above the $1.00 cover price of the newspaper.
3. Sell *StreetWise* without the proper I.D. badge.
4. Fight with other vendors over sales pitches or territories.
5. Use racial, sexist or foul language while selling *StreetWise*.
6. Verbally or physically harass the general public or anyone who refuses to buy the paper.
7. Use aggressive sales pitches, obstruct the public way, or sell papers in off-limit areas.
8. Sell other products or papers while wearing the *StreetWise* I.D.
9. Sell hats, bags, or other articles that come with the *StreetWise* sales kit.
10. Supply newspapers to non-badged persons.

When I first read the paper, I realized that it had great potential for use in creative writing classes. Written by and about the homeless, the articles focus on their concerns. Often they are gripping accounts of encounters with the law, the dangers of the streets, or the web of nightmares which social services can spin.

My purpose in using this material was two-fold. First, I wanted to provide material from which my students could derive ideas for writing. My students are nontraditional. Kennedy-King College is an urban community college, with all the challenges to its mission of education which that implies. The students come primarily from Chicago's public schools, whose problems are legendary.

My students take creative writing with the desire to write, for reasons which vary from actually going into journalism to simply earning three hours of transferable college credit. They do not bring with them, however , a broad knowledge base or literary experience from which to draw. Minority students are suspicious of books, believing them to be simply propaganda. Consequently, I must provide substance as well as form in teaching writing in a way which they will accept.

My second reason for using StreetWise material is that many of my students are at or below poverty level, receiving help from local and federal governmental agencies. For the first time, I am teaching a woman who actually lives in a shelter. Nevertheless, many of them espouse the negative ideas which some people have about the homeless--that they want to live on the street, that all of them are mentally ill, or drug addicts, that they do not want to work, etc. I had wanted to raise the level of their awareness about the homeless, indeed, the whole question of poverty and its sources, without seeming to preach. By using articles from this

newspaper, I have been able to stir them to question their basic assumptions about the very poor. These articles, after all, were created by the people immersed in that reality.

Precisely because they are so economically close to the StreetWise vendors, my students sometimes find it difficult to use the stuff of their lives in writing stories. They also do not feel that there is anything in their lives worth setting to paper. Using the readings from StreetWise allows them to discuss these issues while maintaining an emotionally protected distance. One student, for example, wrote a story whose jungle setting proved that she had no idea what being in a jungle was like, nor had she done any reading to prepare for such a story, as I had suggested. When I spoke with her, she told me about how difficult it was for her to find time to write. She mentioned that she usually wrote her journal entries, which I had assigned, during visits with her child to the clinic. Writing gave her a sense of balance during those times. She spoke about how her daughter's severe asthma forced them to depend on the special transportation for the handicapped, and how one driver in particular was insensitive and insulting when her daughter vomited in the bus. The more she spoke, the more I realized that there was a story which she could write, for the sake of her mental health as well as for the sake of her grade, which would be much more vital than her jungle story. She did write the story with more enthusiasm than I had seen in her other assignments.

I developed the assignments which follow for the fiction class.

Some of the readings contain information indicating that the writer of the article is himself a poet. For my students, it was a revelation to understand the importance which writing has in the life of someone who had to do without so much.

As a result of using the StreetWise material which I provided, some students have continued to read the paper, buying copies from a local vendor. While fulfilling a need for specific information, this material also makes poverty less anonymous and less shame-producing. Because individual vendors return each day to the same street corner, or storefront, or bus stop, students get to know the face of poverty through the specific face of a vendor proffering a bundle of newsprint.

In addition, the students see people who are very similar to themselves, who come from very similar circumstances. These people have not allowed adverse circumstances to discourage them into giving up. For my students, that is a powerful example, worth every bit of the work it takes to earn three hours transferable college credit.

Write a page of dialogue between these three characters. Let them reminisce about the past a little, reflect on the present, and plan for the future. Make the dialogue free-wheeling and lively. Remember--good dialogue reveals character.

FROM A POLICE WOMAN

My name is Debra J. Rounds. I have been a Chicago Police Officer for eleven years now, on the City's South side in the Pullman District. Our district spans everything from the well-to-do to abject poverty. I have seen death too often, but there is more than enough life to make up for it. It is truly an experience. These stories are based on what I have seen and experienced on the streets that I have worked.

On a very cold December night, during the winter of 1991, when people of means were seriously snuggled beneath heavy blankets in the warmth of their homes, three homeless people were sitting on a bench beneath one of those domed bus shelter structures designed to temporarily keep rain off of CTA passengers. Not too unusual unless you consider that these three people were wrapped together under several layers of heavy sheet plastic, almost like a package of human hot dogs. They weren't trying to make a political statement, nor were they an exhibit of living sculpture. They were simply trying to keep warm.

Their appearance, first in the bus shelter at 100th and Cottage Grove, then another night at 115th and Halsted, was somewhat of a puzzlement to confused citizenry. The police were called to check on "suspicious people at the bus stop," and my personal favorite, "dead bodies on the bench." You couldn't blame passer bys, however, as the trio underneath the plastic rarely moved or displayed any interest in the interest in them. But if you were brave enough to get closer, and offer money or a hot cup of coffee, you knew that there were three industrious, and very much alive, human beings there. You realized that they were there because that's where they wanted to be, and as long as they weren't doing anything other than causing an occasional driver at 2:00 in the a.m. to slow down and take a look, there was no reason to ask them to leave. The trio were always gone by morning, when the first rush hour maniacs appeared, and never left any trace of their previous nights existence behind. Where they went during the day was any body's guess.

I didn't see the people wrapped in plastic during the winter of 1992. They did not show up in their usual bus shelters, and there were no calls to the police of strangely wrapped items at the bus stop. It is possible that they moved on to another district, or they finally found shelter indoors, or maybe they even split up their plastic and went their separate ways. Or maybe winter finally had its way with them. I don't know. But sometimes I do find myself thinking about those three people I never really got to know, and then I wonder why I didn't

This Is Henry Allen

Have the character write a letter to the first of his ex-wives. What would he want to say? What emotional tone would predominate? In what kind of story would the letter appear? Can you hint at her personality by the things he says?

This is Henry I Allen (his name is changed to protect the privacy that he enjoys), fifty-seven years old, black and blind in his right eye. At one time, he says, he was head of a security firm in Camden, New Jersey. Today, he is homeless. But if you're expecting a tale of sadness and woe, that's not the impression that Mr. Allen wants you to go away with. All he wants from you is that you understand that at any time, given misfortune, you could be him.

It's 3:00 a.m., a muggy beginning to morning, and Mr. Allen is seated on the street with his dog, Lorie, who herself is a very gangly, mutt-like German Shepherd. He swears that she is half wolf, half Doberman pinscher. The two of them are enjoying a meal of bologna and cheese sandwiches, with a small cottage cheese salad on the side. The meal was generously bestowed on them by a kind-hearted security guard, and they relished it. I asked if it would be an inconvenience for him to speak to me, and he was most gracious in his response. He began his tale with the reason why he began his sojourn to the streets— the recent death of his daughter. "Her car went out of control and hit a viaduct," he began. "I had stayed with her in her home until the accident. I had my own room upstairs. I liked that." Lorie, having eaten everything on her Styrofoam plate, fell wistfully asleep at his feet. "I've been married three times, and my ex-wives are witches. I wasn't going to live with them. So I started living on the streets. I've been out here since November of 1992. I pick up cans, garbage, even couches. And I fix things." He suddenly became very animated as his hands began working on an imaginary item. "I found a color television in the alley once, and I fixed it and sold it." He was very proud of that. "I'm not a rocket scientist," he added, "but I'm smart."

He then paused, and his eyes began to scan the dark morning sky. "Living on the streets is frustrating, but not difficult," he continued. "There are worse things. Chicago is really bad in the winter, really cold. I sleep in abandoned buildings, in a sleeping bag with four blankets. I always try to find buildings made like cull de sacs, where I can see what's coming in on me. Last winter was the worse so far, because I had to sleep outside a lot. I've been robbed six times. But once you make it through December to March, you're okay."

I asked him if he wanted to take a break and finish his food, but he said he wanted to continue. "I have a lot of rage," he said, "and talking helps." He then told me he was once a professional photographer, and that buried inside the battered, brown leather bag he carried his possessions in was a very expensive camera. That camera is how he came to be in the company of Lorie. "A woman owed me money for photos I took for her, and because she was broke she offered me Lorie." He gazed lovingly at the brown and black animal. "I've had her since January. She watches out for me while I sleep. Look at her ears perk up, see? She hears us talking about her." I confessed all I could see was one very deeply sleeping dog, but he insisted she was alert and on the case. "I won't go anywhere without my dog. If I can't take her with me, I'm not going."

That's partially the reason why he avoids shelters—partially. "Shelters are dehumanizing. You have people watching you all the time, even watching you shower. You only get two minutes to shower. On the streets, I go to the fast food places and wash up in the bathroom. I'm a country boy. I'd rather be outdoors." He paused, and then changed the subject as if it was the turn of someone else inside his soul to speak. "I was in the Army. A second lieutenant, grade D3. I was a military policeman. The government owes me $6,300."

"What would you do if you had the money?" I asked. "I want to become a real estate broker," he replied, smiling broadly. "I want to change the neighborhood and create jobs and hire people off the streets." He never mentioned anything about buying decent housing for himself. "I'm an alcoholic," he added, "and that's why I never have any money in my pockets. I have associates, but no friends. Friends will rip you off. A friend once hit me with a stick and broke my glasses. But I survived. Every day I see a sunrise I'm blessed."

I could tell he was tired of talking. He began gathering up Lorie's leash, a leash almost as long as a laundry line. I gave him several dollars for the interview, not because he needed the money, but because I had taken up his time, time which was as valuable to him as it would be to anyone of us. He thanked me, and said he hoped we could talk again sometime. And then he was gone. *I hope the Winter of 1993 is a mild one.*

*****

Groot

Write a scene in pantomime in which no oral dialogue occurs. The characters do communicate something of their experience with the result that one of them is moved by what he experiences. Use gesture, touch, movement, facial expressions--anything but speech.

The pizza box felt warm balancing on my hand. I turned my bike down the alley and veered around the potholes. They soon became unmanageable and I feared I might drop the pizza. Or I might fall, but at the moment, the pizza's health and safety took priority over my own. I had the night to myself, a steamy, delicious pizza, and a video tucked under my arm. With difficulty, I restrained myself from opening the box and eating a piece of the oozing cheese pizza. My great fortitude of spirit was the only thing that allowed me to defer gratification until I would reach my homey apartment and release my raging, but domestic id.

Ahead, at the end of the alley, I saw two women beside the dumpsters in back of my building. Green, scratched, dented dumpsters. Written on the front in big, block letters was "Groot." A thin, older lady poked and stirred the garbage with a pole. Beside her stood a grocery cart piled with discarded clothes, appliances and things of doubtful and indiscernible usefulness. She moved with quiet, even motions. At the dumpster next to her stood a large, younger woman. Her body features were thick. Her face, puffy. She moved with broad gestures, as if she invested more energy than needed for the simplest action. The older lady didn't acknowledge my presence but silently stirred the garbage. The younger woman turned with her big, open face and watched me pass. I heard them talk quietly as I approached my back stairwell.

Approaching the dumpster, I had become acutely aware of the warm pizza box in my hand. Momentarily, I thought of offering a piece. The same way I think of offering fruit to the street person asking for money outside the grocery store. Foolishly, I am intimidated by the encounter, or worse, the idea of looking foolish and self-conscious about the gesture, the attention it draws. Forgetting the person, the outside world intrudes on concern for another, on compassion in life.

I look down. I've got eight pieces of pizza, a warm apartment, plates to eat on, wine to stimulate the taste buds. I leaned my bike against the brick wall and walked back toward the dumpsters. My approach drew the women's attention and they stopped digging and sifting. Briefly, I felt the weight of an unexplored situation. Is this insulting? Ludicrous? I also felt a lightness, the openness of an unexplored situation.

"You want some pizza?"

The young woman brushed her scraggly black hair from her face and beamed without reservation.

"My, yes!"

"You like spinach?" (I'm not sure what I thought. That they'd say, "Oooh, no. If it was pepperoni, we'd love it, but spinach makes me gag.")

"Sure," the older woman said. Her demeanor was quiet, maternal. She looked up into my eyes, "You don't want that yourself?"

"I got all this."

"Thank you."

Opening the box, I loosened two pieces of the steaming pizza.

The Cardboard Box

Create a scene, using the woman in the article, as she experiences the setting you have previously described. Allow her to interact with one of the characters you have already created. Introduce the possibility of conflict in the interaction.

The cardboard box

It is six feet tall by six feet wide. It's walls and floor are a bland color of light beige. The structure barely stays standing since it is made out of cardboard. There are spots of the box that are a darker shade of beige and warped on the outside because in those specific areas the box has gotten wet. The ceiling is caving in. It looks like a weight has been dropped on it, leaving a permanent sign of destruction. Inside there is a distinct aroma that smells like a cross between sweat socks and rotted food. The box is full of what many people might call junk. In one comer there is a pile of rotted banana peels, fish bones and various other pieces of food that are now unidentifiable. The pile looks as if someone reached down into the remnants of a garbage disposal and then threw these remains onto the ground and let them dry up in the sun. The floor is carpeted with newspapers dating back as far as ten years. Tattered rags that are thin and worn down to the last thread are scattered in respective corners of the box. A dusty photo album, an antique Christmas ornament with a broken hook, a bag of aluminum pop cans, six empty Pepsi bottles, a baseball whose leather is ripped and whose red lacing is faded and hanging down its side, a pile of obsolete trinkets, and a jar full of glass marbles, each one possessing its own unique color and size, fill the box. Light gleams into the box through the wet spots that are thin and worn and through the cracks that make up the door. I look further and see the eyes of a frail woman worn ragged by continuous hardship. The story of her life can be read in her expressive eyes and by the number of wrinkles that encompass her weathered face. The cardboard box shows as much pain and suffering as the aged woman's face. To some this may look like a cardboard box, but to this fragile woman, it's home.

Robert McDuff

Given the setting and the character it seems to reveal, write a scene in which the speaker encounters his first hurdle for the day. Who will present him with his first problem? Is there enough substance in that encounter for it to develop into the driving source of conflict?

S.R.O.S. - Where do you go from here...

I would like to explain what that means. And, exactly what that means to many of our area's check-drawing (SSI, Veterans, Public Aid and Small Income) and/or poorer citizens.

First of all S.R.O. means single room occupancy. It means you can rent a room in what many cases is a rooming house, flophouse or transient hotel, usually at a fairly cheap price. There is also an organization that helps S.R.O. owners to obtain loans meant to be used for fixing up these types of places so they can be respectable as far as living conditions.

I wish to tell you a story about what is going on in a place I just fled, located on west Madison St. near Morgan (approx. 1000W). On the south side of Madison is a small string of abandoned buildings, built as long ago as the 1870's. They are, in a lot of ways, the tombstones of the old Skid Row. In the old days they were flophouses, brothels and bars. On the north side of Madison are some of the same buildings except a couple are still occupied and look now as they did then. By the way, I mean the inside as well as the outside.

Let me describe the building I lived in so you can get a feel for what it's like to submit to sub-standard living conditions because of a lack of financial independence. I moved to this building in what I viewed as a "step up" from where I had been living, a place that people on the street call a "chicken coop." A quick description of a chicken coop is a 5'x7'x7' closet-sized cubicle topped with chicken wire. The wire helps to keep people from jumping over the top of your walls and stealing your stuff. Probably not much different, in this vet's opinion, from a P.O.W. cage. There were 60-70 of these cubicles on each dormitory-style floor in my building. The actual ceilings are 12-14' above the chicken wire. I was constantly subjected to large deposits of methane gas and biological germ warfare because of the fact that these were open-topped rooms. By that I mean that every time someone passed wind or was sick everyone shared in it. So I moved.

The place where I moved was in fact 3 old buildings connected together, with one address. Most people in the building are elderly, single and on aid checks of one kind or another - the typical tenant of choice of the management because of their guaranteed income. I moved into a room which cost $60.00 a week. It had a refrigerator and a stove. The fridge froze everything and I had to keep the gas turned off so I wouldn't blow up. I did complain, but nothing was done to fix either appliance during the 4-5 months I lived there. When I left, the stove was fixed the next day. I know this because my friend "Joe" lives there in my old room now. The rodents in the building were large and held mating rituals, screaming at other rats in the hall in front of the bathroom every night. The roaches firmly owned the walls and sinks. Imagine cleaning rat cah-cah out of the shower before using it each day. Or watching the rats run relay races through the caved-in ceiling just above the shower while you bathed in a slime-coated metal shower stall.

The character reveals more about himself and his struggles. He also mentions the Paxton Hotel Fire, occurring in a substandard S.R.O. in which many people died. How might such an event have affected him? Imagine him talking to someone badly burned, still in the hospital weeks after the event. Write such dialogue.

After living there for a couple of months I noticed a large amount of traffic in and out of the building manager's apartment directly below me. I investigated this activity by asking different people what was going on. I found out that he was doing a brisk business in cigarettes which he bought very cheaply at Ft. Sheridan and sold for inflated prices to the old men and other people who lived there. He also sold cocaine on credit, because after all, he had a captive audience. You may remember my debut column where I admitted my trouble with drugs in the past, but up until that time I hadn't done any drugs in almost a year. Well, my willpower caved in and I got involved again - becoming physically and mentally addicted once more. I believe the ready availability and "helpful" credit that the pusher/manager provided made it just too easy to resist. In other words, everyone owed the manager all the time. I fell behind in my rent and, of course, to my drug supplier.

This was obviously not getting me anywhere. I decided to put my foot down and take control of my life again. I went to the building's owner, who also owns the currency exchange across the street, and told him about the problem. Two days later tho' the manager was back in business, although he was a little bit more discreet because his boss had put the heat on him.

I couldn't stay there so I moved to another place. I hear things are back to normal there now - just business as usual!

The Mayor of Chicago, after the Paxton Hotel Fire, said he just didn't want to shut all these old buildings down because what would happen to all the people in a similar situation all over the city. I don't want to see all those people made homeless because the law steps in and shuts them down - but what do we have to do to give all those people good living conditions without making the rent unaffordable? I think slum landlords need retraining. I think the needs of people who live in these types of buildings must be addressed.

By the way, I'm quite all right now. I live in a clean place with a shower and toilet in my own room, and I'm much happier. I think that the S.R.O.s are basically well-intentioned, but they need constant monitoring and must be sensitive to the occupants, as well as just the property owners.

If you are a lawyer, a realtor, an alderman, even a slumlord, please help us! We don't have any extra money or clout and we need some helping hands. I thought I was taking a step up from the chicken coops to a rooming house, but I guess not. I hope I have now. See you on the streets.

Verne Cooper

The following are several passages excerpted from a daily diary chronicling Cooper's life and work as a Streetwise vendor. As you can see from his entries, he is a writer, which is very important to him. Within these entries, Cooper reveals the kind of person he is. Imagine yourself as a friend of Verne Cooper, tagging along as he goes about his day. Can you write a scene showing the experience? Remember--both of you are writers. Does that make a difference?

Saturday, June 19, 1993

5:00 a.m. Woke up half an hour early. While in the shower I telephone God. I need a going away present for a God loving friend.As I step out of the shower he answers. I sit on the bed and towel off, immediately grab this pad of paper and pen. God is moving my hand again. (4943 North Kenmore)

7:00 a.m. to 8:00 a.m. Breakfast at Cafe. (1319 West Wilson)

8:30 a.m. to 9:00 a.m. *StreetWise*. Purchase forty papers for regular Sunday Location. (62 East 13th Street)

9:30 a.m. Home Base. Store thirty papers. Take thirteen with me. (4943 North Kenmore)

10: 15 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. Inspiration Cafe, to hear and see (for the first time in person) a truly dynamic messenger in the recovery fellowship, Brother Earl Cannamore. Afterwards, give .omplimentary copy and get autographed one for the editor. He states that he buys a *StreetWise* every time he sees a vendor, no matter how many that he has. I autograph my poem with "I thank you for your Moses." he states "I know you're an artist because I never heard that phrase before".(1319 West Wilson)

12:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m. Aldi for diet pops in the can. (Broadway and Sunnyside) Goldblatt's for handkerchiefs, briefs, and $3.96 canvas deck shoes. They don't have my size. (Broadway and Leland). Green Mill Lounge to get ground rules of Sunday Night's Poetry Slam. (Broadway and Lawrence) Run into Jerry T. we sit on nearby bus stop bench.We smoke cigarettes and talk recovery for at least an hour. She departs feeling better, me too. (Broadway and Ainslie).

2:10 p.m. to ?. Home Base.Eat, take nap, wash load of clothes. Decide to forego tonight's dinner at Cafe (6:00 p.m.) and rest.AA meeting at 7:00 p.m.Will work *StreetWise* instead. (4943 North Kenmore)

People say that God works in mysterious ways, but my God is a strange dude. A thunderstorm stops me from going to the Cafe at 6:00 p.m. The chair of the meeting stops by to see me at 7:00 p.m. God moved my hand earlier in the laundry room. I finish washing all of my clothes and he moves my hand again. I finish the poem that I started this morning. I hope the boss (smile) likes it. I have seventy-one *StreetWises*. They'll go.God has always provided for me. Shower, snack, have a restful night. (4943 North Kenmore)

Wednesday, June 23, 1993

5:30 a.m. Wake up, wash and dress. (4943 North Kenmore)

7:00 a.m.- 8:30 a.m. Breakfast at Cafe. More discussion with staff about poem for volunteer. (1319 West Wilson)

8:45 a.m. to 9:45 a.m. Meet one on one with counselor at R.E.S.T.; Topic: need to be excused from mandatory men's focus group meeting on Friday, July 2nd. The first Friday of the month is always "Big Money" day for *StreetWise* vendors. Approved. (941 West Lawrence)

10:00 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. Home Base. Freshen up and short nap. (4943 North Kenmore)

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11:35 a.m. Catch El at Argyle with twenty-five papers. Will attend AA meeting at 205 West Wacker at 12:10 p.m. before work. Transfer at Belmont to Ravenswood El down to the Merchandise Mart.

12:10 p.m. to 1:00 p.m. Lunch at KFC in Merchandise Mart. Decide how and where to sell twenty-five papers.

2:30 p.m. to 5:40 p.m. Platforms only, (not while on trains) head for home method. Start at Mart platform inbound the Loop side. A few sales. Next stop Quincy and LaSalle platform, no sales in five minutes. It 's 4:15 p.m., nineteen papers left, if I don't want to work until 7:00 p.m., I have to move now. Around Loop to my tried and true stop Number Two. All Gone by 5:30 p.m. El to Argyle.

6:00 p.m. Home Base. Watch news, eat. Nap before 8:00 AA meeting at Lakeshore Hospital. (4943 North Kenmore)

8:15 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. Female member not allowed in because her children are with her. One is a special child. We sit on Lakefront and talk for an hour. The children enjoy themselves playing. (Gunnison and Marine Drive)

10:00 p.m. Home Base.

Monday, June 21, 1993

5:30 a.m. Wake up, wash dress. Medical appointment today.

7:00 a.m. Breakfast at Cafe (1319 West Wilson)

8:00 a.m. I have twenty papers with me, decide to work , until 10:00 a.m. appointment. When nine out of ten have it already, it's time to branch out. (Wilson Street El Station)

9:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m. Salvation Army, Tom Seay Drop-in-Center. Wait for medical team to arrive and meditate. Should I work trains this afternoon? A captive audience allows me to use my sales pitches. No!

10:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. See medical team, news is good, but stress test results not back yet. They like new poems. Next appointment is three weeks from today. (1025 West Sunnyside)

11:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Minor shopping spree in uptown. Happy Father's Day to me. (Groceries, shorts and top.)

12:30 p.m. to 2:00 p.m. Home Base. Lunch, nap. Up at 2:30 p.m., freshen up and dress for work.

3:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. Catch El at Argyle to *StreetWise*. Purchase forty papers. Submit latest two poems to Koko (cashier). She likes the same one that the medical team did. (62 East 13th Street)

4:30 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. El back to my second favorite spot. I'll do fine here. I make $16 (Location withheld.)

7:00 p.m. to 8:40 p.m. El back to Wilson walk to Clarendon, to Weiss Hospital for Meeting. (Wilson and Clarendon)

9:30 p.m. Home Base. Shower, watch news, sleep. Have a restful night. (4943 North Kenmore)

Friday, July 2, 1993

9:12 a.m. This writing is a wonderment. Believe me when I say there is more important writing that I need to be doing at this point in time in my life at this moment. A fourth step is calling and I just set a short term goal of beginning it before I do any more creative writing. To be rigorously honest, recovery first! I'll keep coming back.

9:38 a.m. Exactly 26 of the most important minutes in my life in a day of the life of a *StreetWise* vendor.

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Sophie's Busy Bee

Write a scene in which an extra-terrestrial wanders into the Busy Bee. Let the alien resemble humans so that he doesn't attract attention by his appearance. Allow him to react to the waitress, the food, the customers in a way which heightens his strangeness. The scene can be humorous, or sad, depending on how you handle the elements.

Sophie's Busy Bee— a legend revisited

No one seems to know what name the restaurant opened with in 1913. I myself ate there 40 years ago, a toddler being shown off by a proud grandfather, but then I couldn't read the sign. Sophie bought the place 27 years ago as the immortal Busy Bee — a mecca for Damon Runyun types and Chicagoans of all flavors.

For those readers who have not had the pleasure, I felt an armchair meal was in order. Showing up at 3 p.m., I was intent on absorbing all the details—and I was starved. The Busy Bee has great food, and tasting it is the fringe benefit of telling about it.

So, muster up your creative visualization techniques and image the hip intersection of Damen, North and Milwaukee avenues. Take a walk on the west side of Damen just south of the "L" tracks and across from the actual Wicker Park at 1546 Damen.

First impression is a rough looking storefront with plywood squares painted long ago in anthracite gray, framing multi-colored neon words "Polish American Home Cooking." Forget first impressions, open the door and let yourself in.

Welcome. You have just walked into a Hologram of the painting Night Hawks, complete with a U-shaped counter, 16-foot ceilings and coffee percolating through glass tubes. The walls in both rooms (the second room was added 15 years ago and has a Chinese restaurant feel) are covered with photographs of mansions—the grande dames of avenues Caton, Schiller, Concord and Hoyne.

Your dining comrades are silver hair regulars, undercover cops and Milwaukee Avenue shopkeepers. In a few hours, the shift changes and the Busy Bee becomes a dining room for aging "Young Urban Pioneers" (the original Yuppies!) and all sorts of creative brethren—some who remember Abbie Hoffman immortalizing the "Bee" in his memoirs.

But, this is a restaurant review, so open the red vinyl menu. Ah, you are somewhat disappointed because it appears the menu is only 10 percent Polish and 90 percent Chicago snack shop. No problem. If you choose American, the reward is prices from the sixties. But unless your idea of a low cal plate is a beef patti, cottage cheese and canned fruit cocktail, opt for the Polish specialties. They are absolutely wonderful.

Today's Blue Plate is Breaded Sparenbs with Kraut for four dollars. A menu clip-on suggests we try the homemade Pierogi in Plum, Peach, Blueberry or Strawberry. Adventurous souls should experience *Flaczki*, a tripe soup for $2.50 or *Bigos*, the famous hunters' stew of beef, sausage and mashed potatoes at four dollars.

I swear the *Bigos* was $3.95 ten years ago and Sophie confirmed my suspicion of the nickle increase. The granddaddy combo plate is a Polish tapas offering a stuffed cabbage, three dumplings, old-fashioned hamburgers, Polish sausage, saurkraut and mashed potatoes for the ridiculous price of seven dollars.

This afternoon, I selected the seven course *Kishka* dinner. The entre filled the plate, a thick piece of sheepcasing stuffed with flavorful beef and rice. Accompanied by mashed potatoes and saurkraut, as well as slivered pickled beets, the bargain of the century also included great chicken soup, coffee and homemade carrot cake. Seriously, the price was $4.75 and the service was great. Atmosphere, quality and price, what more is there? Go for the legend and stay for breakfast, lunch or dinner.

There is a parking lot in back, but the route is totally convoluted by one way streets—must have been designed by an incumbent alderman. *Marty Raisman*

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